

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE E 23

NEW YORK TIMES

16 November 1986

WASHINGTON James Reston

# The Issue: Reagan's Judgment

WASHINGTON  
It's easy to understand the uproar in Washington over President Reagan's swapping spree in Iran, but it's hard to understand why anybody here is surprised. He has been playing these covert games for almost six years; the only difference now is that he's getting caught.

The Democrats profess to see all sorts of dark motives behind this latest effort to deal with the tangles in Teheran. The President, they charge, is evading the Congress, corrupting the National Security Council, and encouraging terrorism by trading guns for hostages.

Of course he is, but the problem is more serious than that. For what he calls his latest "Strategic Diplomatic Initiative" — as if one S.D.I. wasn't bad enough — dramatizes the greatest weakness in his misconduct of foreign policy, namely that he simply will not think through in advance the consequences of his words and actions.

There's nothing wrong with trying to get in touch with "moderate elements" in Iran, assuming that such exist, but to ship arms to Teheran in order to show our "good faith" to a nation that has mocked and humiliated the United States is almost obscene. And to insist that this had nothing to do with the hostages or the Iran-Iraq war is an insult to normal intelligence.

The issue is not the President's motives but his judgment. Obviously, Iraq is not consoled by the President's statement that the arms were merely "defensive," since defensive weapons are precisely what Iran needs to deal with the Iraqi air raids.

Also, one official explanation here is that the Ayatollah Khomeini is old and therefore it's reasonable to trade with politicians who may soon replace him. But Mr. Reagan, who isn't

young, presumably wouldn't like it if Iraq or any other government sent secret agents into the United States to negotiate with his potential successors.

The Iranian fiasco has created a stir here because it follows several other examples of Presidential misjudgment. Perhaps the most serious was Mr. Reagan's offer at the Reykjavik summit with Mikhail Gorbachev to eliminate all nuclear missiles, meaning all nuclear ballistic missiles, without realizing the vast difference between the two. That one sent a hiccup through the Senate and a shudder through the alliance.

---

## The Iranian operation had consequences he should have foreseen

---

Earlier, an American plane manned by former C.I.A. employees and carrying weapons to the contras was shot down over Nicaragua with the official explanation that the U.S. Government had no part in this defiance of Congressional legislation. Just a bunch of American patriots helping the Nicaraguan "freedom fighters," the President explained.

As usual, the cover-ups were more damaging than the covert deals, as in the denials that the C.I.A. had mined the harbors of Nicaragua. When in trouble, the Administration swaps an American reporter for a Soviet spy

and says it isn't a swap but a humanitarian arrangement. Or it approves a "disinformation" memorandum written by the head of the National Security Council and says this was not intended to mislead the American press but merely to worry the terrorists in Libya.

Usually, the President has gotten away with these "terminological inexactitudes" by proclaiming worthy objectives and glowing visions of balanced budgets and nuclear shields in a terror-free world, or by letting his aides assume the blame for his bloopers, but this time on Iran, he had to take personal responsibility for the arms shipments and the consequences he didn't foresee.

In this case, he used members of the National Security Council and former N.S.C. officials to carry out the operations, with fake passports, against the advice of the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense.

It is his view, against the legislation and tradition of the past, that the N.S.C. staff can operate as his secret agents in the shipment of arms, and he can then protect them from Congressional questioning by invoking "executive privilege."

Too many things have gone wrong in recent months, however, for this to continue. The Democrats now control the committees of both the House and the Senate and have the power of investigation, which they intend to use and will probably abuse in the runup to the 1988 Presidential elections.

There is a growing feeling here that the President has been trying to do too much in too big a hurry, that in the past elections and on foreign policy questions he has redoubled his efforts while losing his aim, that he has succeeded by publicity and is now losing by it, and perhaps most important, he is running out of time and running out of luck.